

Volunteering in Nong Pak Tiem
9.02.06 – 7.03.06
Sabine/Austria

The Placement:

Nong Pak Tiem is a small village in Nong Pling Subdistrict, Nikhom Nam Oon District in Sakhon Nakhon Province in the region of Isan (the Northeast of Thailand).

382 people (128 male and 204 female) are counted; belonging to 70 families. The main occupation is rice farming, some fishing, rubber farming and minor fruit growing. Women are weaving and produce paper flowers if they have a way to sell (e.g. for Japanese firms who place orders). The village is almost surrounded by a beautiful lake – the Ban Kang Lake.

Through some motivated villagers the idea of developing as an eco-tourism village was started some four years ago. Through the cooperation with ETAC (www.ecoventure.co.th) volunteers were sent to the village to bring in their skills and give the participants the chance to learn on the job and other villagers the chance to see how it could be to have tourists; and especially foreign tourists, in the village.

With my background in tourism, anthropology and as a western (Farang) tourist with a backpackers career I came to Nong Pak Tiem. There I was supposed to bring in whatever skills I had; participate, observe and first and foremost learn about Thai or Isan village culture. The following pages build a summary of my activities, observations and suggestions from the view of my personal background described above. I hope that it is useful not only to future volunteers but also to my hosts; who when translated; can read the same and take whatever ideas they might get out of it and find useful and applicable for them. And if there are none at least they can see another example of a Farang view and prepare them for future visitors that might come.

What I did:

One of the hardest, if not the hardest challenge on my four weeks placement was to fill my days. As for the language barrier (see below), the immobility and the lack of activities of the villagers during the none rice growing season many days were spent with doing nothing. Good books are therefore essential. As I know that it is hard to imagine that this could be a problem I will try to write down what exactly I did so you will have some idea. Please note though that my experiences are totally dependent on my personality, my greatest challenges might only be a small inconvenience for you.

- 9.02. arrival in NPT (Nong Pak Tiem) at 1 p.m.
- 10.02. go to the village meeting in the morning (about an hour)
Take a walk to the wat and lake
Afternoon: visit women who dye cotton for weaving (about an hour)
- 11.2. drive to Sakhon Nakhon to visit OTOP shop (day trip)
- 12.2. bake cakes with village women (about two hours), do laundry (about an hour)
- 13.2. bake cake with village women
- 14.2. visit elementary school with self made doughnuts (about two hours)
- 15.2. visit a wat close to the village, visit officials (about 3 hours)
- 16.2. visit agro learning center/home made herbs (about 2 hours)
- 17.02. -
- 18.02. participate in Buddhist prayer, visit friends of host and a scenic wat (day trip)
- 19.02. community cleaning at the lake (until lunch)
- 20.02. visit another wat in the area and a resort (half day trip)

- 21.02 drive to Internet facility (about 2 hours)
- 22.02. do laundry
- 23.02. school: do cookies with kids, teach English, participate in Aerobic
- 24.02. visit secondary school (until lunch)
- 25.02. do laundry
- 26.02. -
- 27.02. have lunch with officials, drive to market (about 4 hours)
- 28.02. -
- 1.03. do Interview with host, visit hospital
- 2.03. do laundry
- 3.03. participate in ‘last day of school – farewell ceremony’
evening: participate in Buddhist prayings at the village
- 4.3. morning: continuation of the Buddhist festival (until lunch)
- 5.3. do laundry
- 6.3. evening: farewell ceremony
- 7.3. leave

Some days were filled with the challenge to get my cloth washed (it is done with big bowls on the floor and I didn’t quite manage the right technique; therefore awkward looks where a regular). This activity, even if done really slowly is not taking more than an hour and therefore doesn’t quite fill the day. What you also see is the many times I went somewhere, visiting wats etc. This was all done with the car, money and time of my host. I appreciated this very much and am very clear that your host can not be around you to entertain volunteers all the time, as he has a job too (as a rubber farmer in this case). Nevertheless, there is a lot of free time left you can use as you please, with books, playing or working on the computer (my host did provide a computer, which was luxury), talking to villagers (if the language allows it), take walks, enjoy the scenery at the lake, go for a run and observe village life.

The language barrier:

With no Thai language skills any volunteer, especially if travelling alone, will have a hard time. The English skills of the villagers are non-existent. I was lucky to have a woman, from outside, live with me for the duration of my stay. She knew some English and with my Thai dictionary we got along pretty well. There was no possibility for a real conversation though, besides some English teachers. It is too bad, because nobody was able to explain to me the Buddhist rituals I got to see, or many other customs. It is a very good way to learn the Thai language though. Teaching the villagers in English was not really working out. I don’t have any teaching skills and the real studying efforts of the villagers is limited. Nevertheless your English knowledge is very much appreciated and the skills are not only needed but also wanted very much.

Male and Female (Gender Issues):

Through my studies (social sciences) classes on gender which had to be taken didn’t seem too interesting to me. The differences between men and women were not felt too painfully when I grew up in Austria, that’s why the issue didn’t touch me as much as others did, until now. Being so close to the Thai village society opened my eyes for many fundamental differences of treatment which are unequal. The issue of gender probably hit me harder being a woman travelling alone, but will also be obvious to others. This is not the place to treat all my observations on gender inequality. For that I wrote an article “Being a Farang Woman in Thailand – or why I don’t want to be called beautiful” which can be soon downloaded from www.seas.at.

Future volunteers have to be prepared to find different moral codes in terms of gender and different expectations of behaviour from women, men or couples. This goes as far as male and

female volunteers are taken to different activities and expected to do different things. I don't believe this should be encouraged by the NGO but it is all part of Thai culture and therefore part of the learning process.

My Observations:

Being in NPT as a Volunteer and eco-tourism consultant I viewed the village as a potential tourism destination, noted what I thought it is still lacking (in the view of most western tourist) always having the dangers of tourism in mind which could be brought with it.

Some place to lock your things: It's not a custom of the villagers to lock anything and I never felt unsafe for myself or my belongings. Despite that the tourists coming don't know the villagers and might only stay for a short while. They are used to have a place where they can lock their belongings. I don't think it's necessary for volunteers, but for future tourists it should be thought about. The newly built guesthouse at the lake has doors which can be locked (I hope), which is sufficient.

Some place to be unwatched: The difference in space and privacy feeling is very different culturally. Experiencing a different culture than one's own is a very rewarding but challenging task. Future tourists coming to Nong Pak Tiem will have to adapt a lot to local customs and even change their behaviours to apply to the local code of conduct. To avoid a burn out which can create tensions a place or space has to be constructed where tourists can be/or do whatever they want. Next to the guesthouse at the lake is a space where tourists should be allowed to sunbathe (an activity which can't be understood by Thai people and will be seen as offending but foreign tourists coming from 'cold countries' will want to expose their bare skin to the sun in order to get tanned). Sitting in the sun and enjoying the weather and the scenery at the lake will be a major activity and should be allowed without social sanctions. The dress code (women's shoulders and knees and everything in between has to be covered at all times) can be applied everywhere else but this tourist space and both parties will be happy.

Information: Tourists coming, will be in a difficult situation. Most likely they will not understand Thai and be in a strange country with strange customs they need as much information as they can get. The brochure and map of the village (already exists), a map of the surrounding areas with activity suggestions (can also be sold to them), information about the nearest hospital, pharmacy, market, post office and internet are essential as well as the options to get there; renting a bike, bicycle or get somebody drive them there. Also information about the Buddhist practises and upcoming festivals should be gathered and produced in English. Nothing is more regrettable as being able to participate in a Buddhist festival and not knowing, and not having anybody who can explain, what it is about.

Furthermore should a *Code of Contact* of the village customs be created in a written form. Most tourists will try to obey this code of conduct but would fail if they don't have written suggestions as most just wouldn't know how to behave properly. This doesn't mean they are not respecting local culture, but simply shows that they are coming from a different culture. There are also many things villagers find to be normal but are very different, strange and at times disturbing and insulting for different cultures. Contact with more volunteers and tourists villagers will observe customs different to their own. An open eye on both sides can facilitate the intercultural communication.

Cleanliness: While I was in NPT, a community effort was made to clean the area at the lake (where the guesthouse was built) to make it look nice. Efforts like this should be done more often, especially at the streets, which are covered with dung. Garbage needs to be collected (See reports from other volunteers on the garbage problem). If the custom of burning the garbage can't be changed (it's not exactly eco), it should at least be collected to do that and not lay around. Just install garbage containers along the main street?! Of course those have to be emptied also; the community has to address these issues. Just note that it doesn't look good, and if you want to be a tourist village you can't have garbage all around and secondly if

you want to be a eco-tourist village find a sustainable way (just burning everything is not one of them) to get rid of the garbage.

People from 'cold countries' have a different relationship with the jungle and its animals, so this should be respected in the cleaning of the guesthouses. Normally, tourists don't want animals of any kind inside their houses.

Offered Trips: As you see in my schedule at the beginning of the report, I was taking to different sights, mostly wats. Tourists definitely want to see all of that, but information is also essential there. Without a guide which you can communicate and tell you the stories surrounding the wat one is like the other. As long as there is no English speaking guide collect the information's about the sights and write it down and get it translated by somebody, so visitors at least can read about the places they visit. What I didn't see is how they make the wine, paper flowers, glass boats and I did not go on the camping or biking trip (has to be tested by other volunteers).

What else tourist need: You should offer a laundry service for tourist. If they stay in the guesthouse they don't have the facilities for washing their laundry. Somebody can collect it and bring it back. Also do most women know how to massages. Write it on the brochure and offer it to tourists.

What else would be interesting: Nature walks, trekking or walks as there are no mountains, traditional healing methods.

Issues of Eco-tourism:

As to my studies I was very interested in the spoken about concept of Eco-tourism used in Nong Pak Tiem. For that I am writing my Master Thesis at the University of Vienna. As soon at it is done it will be available through SEAS www.seas.at.

Thanks to my hosts in Nong Pak Tiem and their hospitality. I learned very much in those four weeks and will never forget this month.

Sabine, Austria